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Pakistan Gets Mixed Signals on A-Arms

Reagan administration officials are at their wits' end trying to figure out how to keep Pakistan from breaking into the nuclear club—short of cutting off all U.S. aid to that strategic American ally.

Intelligence experts have warned that Pakistan is on the verge of producing and testing a nuclear bomb after years of buying—and stealing—the necessary technology.

The administration's public position is to restate assurances by Pakistan's dictator, Gen. Mohammad Zia ul-Haq, that his country has neither the desire nor the wherewithal to produce a bomb and that its nuclear program is for purely peaceful research.

But privately the administration has done more than just wring its hands at Zia's disingenuous disclaimer. My associate Indy Badhwar has learned that there has been a flurry of diplomatic activity aimed at cajoling or pressuring Zia not to build a bomb. High-level presidential aides have visited Zia at least a dozen times in Islamabad to bring warnings from President Reagan. The most recent was veteran envoy Vernon A. Walters, who "told Zia to knock off certain things he was doing," according to one source.

There are mixed assessments of the administration's pressure tactics. But according to one report, Zia has agreed—for now, at least—not to operate Pakistan's uranium reprocessing plant or to enrich the fissionable material at any other facility.

Yet the Reagan administration appears to have sent a contradictory signal to Zia in another development. That was its response to the arrest of

a Pakistani "businessman," Nazir Vaid, for trying to smuggle nuclear-triggering devices out of the United States. Vaid was tried, found guilty, given a suspended sentence and deported to Pakistan.

Journalist Seymour Hersh gained access to documents confiscated from Vaid after his arrest. They linked Vaid directly to major figures in Pakistan's nuclear project. And although Vaid claimed he was buying the nuclear triggers for industrial use, he had tried to acquire 50 of them—more than half the number in use commercially throughout the world.

But instead of trying Vaid as a spy, the Justice Department let him off. Several senior State Department officials reportedly fear that U.S. leniency will encourage Zia to ignore attempts to keep him from building a bomb.

Vaid was not the first Pakistani to be caught trying to smuggle banned nuclear technology. Other so-called businessmen have been apprehended with everything from blueprints to hardware in Canada, Turkey, Holland and France.

Pakistan's attempts to build a nuclear weapon became so blatant that in 1979 U.S. military aid was cut off, as required by law. But it was resumed after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and Pakistan's sudden emergence as the conduit for U.S. aid to the Afghan rebels. In a specially drilled loophole in the law, Congress stipulated that aid to Pakistan would be cut off only if Zia explodes a nuclear weapon.

The White House supports the exemption for Pakistan, arguing that cutting off aid might make Zia reluctant to help the Afghan rebels.